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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LEIPZIG 000015

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS WIN MINOR GAINS IN EASTERN GERMANY'S  
COMMUNAL ELECTIONS

REF: A. 08 LEIPZIG 21, B. 07 LEIPZIG 20

LEIPZIG 00000015 001.2 OF 002

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Summary  
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¶1. (U) The right-wing extremist "National Democratic Party of Germany" (NPD) achieved minor gains in the June 7 communal elections in the eastern states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia, had an increase in support in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (M-V) from .08 to 3.2 percent of the vote statewide (as compared to 7 percent in 2006 state elections). These gains might serve to increase the NPD's influence throughout the region. The NPD also made inroads in urban areas, which could be attributed to the party's recruitment of candidates from bands of right-wing extremists called "Free Comradships" (Ref A). By building on a small but reliable voter base, the NPD could win seats in upcoming state parliamentary elections in Saxony and Thuringia. A history of poor conduct by sitting representatives, however, and a lack of hot-button issues to rally voters to its side might cripple the party's chances in state elections. End Summary.

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COURT RULING HELPS NPD PICK UP COMMUNAL COUNCIL SEATS  
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¶2. (U) A February 2008 Federal Constitutional Court decision struck down states' ability to maintain or establish a 5 percent threshold for parties to win city council seats (a threshold that also exists at the federal level to win seats in the Bundestag). Intended to counter discrimination against smaller parties, this allowed the right-wing extremist NPD to get seats in city and communal councils despite a low percentage of votes in the June 7 communal elections. In the 2004 communal elections, the NPD did not run in Dresden, Leipzig, or Magdeburg, although another, smaller, right-wing extremist party -- the Deutsche Soziale Union -- ran in Leipzig and Dresden and won about 2 percent of the vote.

¶3. (U) In Saxony, the NPD won only 2.3 percent of the total vote yet increased its number of seats in communal councils state-wide from 26 to 72 (still lower than the NPD's predicted win of 100 seats). In M-V the NPD received 3.2 percent of the vote, quadruple the percentage it got in the 2004 communal elections but substantially less than the 7 percent it won in the 2006 state elections. In Ueckermuende, M-V, the NPD actually outperformed the SPD winning 12.1 percent, compared to 11.8 (the Left Party led with 35.2, CDU won 29.5). In Thuringia

the NPD garnered 3.1 percent; it did not run in prior communal elections in the state.

14. (U) Despite these gains, the NPD suffered losses in rural areas compared to its showing five years ago (although still gaining some seats in councils, as noted in para 2). In Saxony's NPD stronghold Limbach-Oberfrohna, the party received 3.9 percent, almost a 50 percent drop. In Saxony's Koenigstein, also a NPD stronghold, the vote percentage dropped from 21 to 9 percent. Notably, the NPD's worst performance - 0.9 percent - was in Mittelsachsen, the only Saxony county with a commissioner to fight extremism. The NPD made negligible gains in urban areas, winning 3 percent in Leipzig, Dresden, Magdeburg, Erfurt, and Rostock; in 2004, right-wing extremist parties either did not run in urban communal elections or received negligible votes (usually less than 2 percent).

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EMPLOYING OLD AND NEW TACTICS TO GAIN VOTERS  
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15. (SBU) In this round of elections, the NPD focused on improving internal coordination, campaigning, and networking in urban areas. Heike Habeck of the Regional Center for Democratic Culture, Bad Doberan, M-V, credited the NPD's organizational efforts for contributing to its success in M-V. According to Habeck, the NPD continues to fill gaps in activities for rural youth. It has established tutoring services, cooking classes, and sport clubs in communities that otherwise provide few social outlets or leisure activities. The NPD uses this access to instill the mostly young participants with right-wing extremist views (Ref B). As a result, the NPD saw some improvement in popular support and was able to win a small number of votes, and increase its wins in cities.

16. (U) The NPD's candidates in the communal elections give credence to a previously unproven but assumed direct connection between the NPD and "Free Comradeships," which are loosely bound

LEIPZIG 00000015 002.2 OF 002

groups of right-wing extremists that were thought to operate independently of the NPD (Ref A). According to a recent article in "Der Spiegel," 300 NPD candidates in the communal elections across eastern Germany were known members of "Free Comradeships;" this was four times the number that participated in the last communal elections. This demonstrates a direct connection between the groups and also highlights the effort the NPD made in putting forth large numbers of candidates, particularly in some areas with a dearth of mainstream candidates running for local office. Indeed, two communities in M-V cancelled elections for lack of candidates.

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COMMENT  
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17. (SBU) The NPD has the strong support of committed right-wing extremists. It has achieved minimal gains since the last communal elections in eastern Germany but overall performed poorly in communal elections across eastern Germany. Still, the NPD is better organized and is working directly with members of the "Free Comradeships." The removal of the 5 percent threshold means the NPD now has gotten a foothold in local government and can spread its influence in city and county councils. How the NPD uses this influence and if it will have any bearing on Saxony and Thuringia state elections on August 30 remains to be seen. NPD representatives in state parliaments have earned poor reputations for their behavior and are unlikely to perform better at the communal level. Recent bad press has centered not only on NPD policies, but also on a range of unprofessional and illegal activities, including smuggling weapons into state parliament buildings, downloading child pornography, and committing fraud. Finally, the NPD's greatest successes have depended on high social dissatisfaction. In the 2004 state elections, for example, voters rallied around the NPD's opposition to unpopular social welfare reforms. Today, however,

the NPD lacks similar hot-button issues to attract disaffected voters.

¶8. (U) In a separate development, the NPD has decided to run in the Brandenburg state elections, breaking a 2005 national agreement with the right-wing "German People's Union" (DVU) that the DVU and NPD would not compete with each other in any state election. Since 1999, the DVU has run and won seats in the Brandenburg state parliament. The head of the Brandenburg Office for the Protection of the Constitution commented that this indicates the NPD's efforts to strengthen its leadership role in the right-wing extremist spectrum. End Comment.

¶9. (U) This is a joint message from ConGens Leipzig and Hamburg and was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.  
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